THE KINGDOM OF GOD
Psalm 47
Mark 1:9-15
March 18, 1973

BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

His childhood and adolescence are, at best, obscure. With the single exception of a story about a family trip to Jerusalem when he was twelve years old we know ~~nothing at all~~ only what we can deduce. The town in which he was brought up was Nazareth, in the district of Galilee, a semi-pagan and much despised region. His parents were part of the Jewish population; his father was a carpenter by trade and we may assume that his eldest son followed him in the trade. He had four younger brother; James, Joses, Judas and Simon: and more than one sister. He spoke the Aramaic of Galilee, with an accent so distinct that it identified him and his followers as Galileans. He also knew the Hebrew language, although it was no longer spoken except in the Temple and Synagog.

At about the age of thirty he embarked on a remarkable career. He showed up one day in a crowd of people on the banks of the Jordon River to hear a prophet by the name of John announce that the day of judgement was at hand. He was, himself, baptized by John, but instead of following John in the Jordon valley, began a campaign of sorts back in Galilee. His method was not John's: instead of baptizing he depended on the spoken word and a helping hand. It is not certain how long it lasted. On the basis of the number of times he celebrated the Passover ~~according to John's account~~ in the 4th Gospel, it may have been three years. But it is also quite possible that the time elapsed from Baptism to Crucifixion may have been about one year.

We know that he took up a kind of permanent residence in a house in Capernum: that he traveled around Galilee, that he taught, healed; that he recruited disciples, that crowds of people flocked to him wherever he went.

We know that he ran into conflict quite early: at first with the religious authorities, and finally with the civil or political authorities. We know that the decisive point in his life was the decision to come into the city of Jerusalem itself. Most of the material in the Gospels deals with that experience which resulted - in five short days - in his execution. We know that his death was followed by his friends claiming that he rose from the dead; and that many of them documented that claim with their own personal experience.

From the point of view of secular history there are a few minor references to him. Tacitus, the Roman chronicler, in his account of the burning of Rome under Nero, in 64 AD mentions the followers of "Christus" as "enemies of mankind" and blames them for the fire. There are two or three other references: none of which tells us much about him except that he existed.

And that 's it: the bare outline of a life. And what emerges from it is an intriguing story - with many gaps, to be sure; and the necessity - if we are to take him at all seriously - of knowing what he said, and what he meant by what he said. As we move through the Lenten Season, this is the project to which we will be setting ourselves. In worship we will be celebrating his Lordship. In sermons we will be focusing on the Biblical witness and the important Biblical themes. We will be jumping off each week - that is to say - not with where we are; but with the Bible. May I suggest, in addition, that this approach to sermonizing is possibly more demanding on the listener than any other: your involvement is necessary: the conclusions to sermonic content will often be left unstated - reserved for you to draw for yourself. May I suggest that you can make this a mutual project by reading the Bible yourself - particularly the Gospels. A good place to begin is with Mark. You will find copies of the four Gospels - in Today's English Version - on the literature rack, and at 5¢ a piece it's a bargain you can hardly ignore.

Mark introduces him in these words: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:14-15)

That is the earliest and most common description of Jesus' message. That is what he said: "The Kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe." The phrase "Kingdom of God" is obviously important: we need to know what he meant when he used it: what his hearers thought about when they heard it: and what it might mean to us twenty centures after the fact. This phrase itself becomes the "Kingdom of Heaven" in Matthew's Gospel because it was written for a distinctly Jewish readership, and the Jews were schooled not to use the name of God. In the fourth Gospel, written decades later, the idea of God's Kingdom is expressed in the phrase "eternal life." Paul, in turn, incorporates the same idea content in his concept of "salvation: and "life in the spirit'. In any case the idea of the "Kingdom

of God" is the fundamental theme of Jesus' message.

Although it may be a rather fuzzy idea to us it was not at all vague to the Jews of the day. For it was a central theme in their own life and history. I was helped to understand the idea by learning that the Hebrew language deals with the idea in verb rather than noun form. God's Kingdom is not a territory with geographical perimeters: it is not a place here or elsewhere: it is not a political relationship or a political system. It is not, that is to say, a Kingdom in the way we use that word. Rather it is the situation in which God's ruling is expressed in his will being done by his people. It is a "state" and not a "place".

In the Old Testament, God's Kingship, God's ruling, was celebrated yearly in ritual and worship. Annually God was reenthroned: Psalms were written to be used on that occassion: they are called enthronement Psalms or Psalms of Ascent. Psalm 47 is a good illustration: "God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet, Sing praises to God, sing praises!..God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne." Long before they had their own monarch Israel's King was God: and when finally the monarchy was established by Saul, then David and Solomon, the King was known as God's son, who ruled on his behalf.

God's Kingdom - God's rule, for the Jews, was a present reality but always a future hope. Because it was a state, and therefore dependent on men obeying God's law and will, it was never perfect; never complete. That would come in the future - on the day of the Lord.

The signigicance of that idea for the life of Israel cannot be overstated. God's rule was what gave them a national identity: God's ultimate and perfect reign was the source of the strong hope in the future that has not died over the centuries. One writer put it in these words: "Upon this hope is built the certainty that God is the Lord of this puzzling world, and will not always remain afar off... It is a fundamental part of these hopes that the spirit of resignation which banishes God to a misty place beyond our ideals and which accepts the idea that no change is possible in this world, is totally strange to it". (~~Jesus of Nazareth, P. 65 Gunther Bornkamm~~)

That's the theology of the Kingdom of God in pure form. But the ancient Jews were

no more pure than anyone else and gradually attached their own nationalistic, patriotic hopes to the idea. \ After the grand and powerful Kingdom put together by David fell apart, patriotism and nostalgia distorted theology. \ And by Jesus' time, the "Kingdom of God" meant to many people political independence from Rome, the restoration of the Monarch and the rebirth of the nation as a mighty world power.

And so it's no wonder that this simple, direct little message - "The Kingdom of God is at hand" - was the source of a lot anxiety. \ Quite obviously, it would have bothered the Romans, who had taken the pulse of their reluctant Hebrew subjects, and who heard in this phrase the whisper of revolt and revolution. \ To the strongly patriotic Jew - the Zealot - it was in fact a thinly disguised call to arms - which, by the way, seems to have been Judas Iscariot's agenda. \ To other Jews - who were enjoying the status quo it was irresponsible and dangerous rhetoric. \ Some - but not many - knew what he meant. \ And the only thing we can be sure of is that when he used the phrase - he got attention - people listened.

"The Kingdom of God is at hand" - God is now reigning.

"Repent" - turn away from all your other commitments.

"Believe the Gospel" - acknowledge God's kingship, enter his kingdom by living as his people.

What did he mean? \ Obviously not an earthly kingdom; \ not a place. \ He made peace of sorts, with the political structure of his day. \ In his mind the Kingdom of God existed simultaeneously with the Roman Empire.

Not a Camelot: \ not an unearthly pie in the sky realm to which all good folks will go bye and bye. \ But a very earthy, real state of being that exists right in the middle of life.

In fact sometimes it is so hidden in the everyday matters of life that men aren't even aware of it - like leaven in bread. \ Sometimes it's so small and inconsequential that men can't see it - like the mustard seed. \ But it exists all the same - in the hearts of men when the will of God is done.

All men are invited to enter - by believing in God's Kingship - his absolute sovereignty over all men and all nations; \ and by living as citizens of this Kingdom, the rules and

laws of which are the will of God himself.

Now - that ultimate question that must be put to any such exercise as this - ("So What?") We know a little bit more than we did before about Jesus use of the phrase "The Kingdom of God" - but if it's going to become God's word to me where I am it has to come alive, be relevant, address me here and now - not just in my mind, but in my heart and spirit and viscera.

Well, to hear Jesus Christ proclaim that God's Kingdom is at hand, and to believe it, is first of all to look at the future with a new and resonant hopefulness. "Hope", I would suggest, has become a major casualty in our day - for some rather understandable reasons. Time Magazine suggests that the return of the P.O.W.'s has become an event of major significance nationally because it's the only really hopeful thing that has happened for a decade. We've learned to live with the assassination of our leaders, with a kind of permanet racial tension that ebbs and flows but never goes away, with escalating violence in our streets, in the sky and still in S. E. Asia. We've grown accustomed to peace that really isn't peace: with staggering national problems which our government apparently believes will simply go away if ignored long enough.

I was interested to hear Dr. William Fischer, a psychiatrist from the I.U. Med. Center, in an address to local Physicians, Clergymen and Nurses this week, list all the psychological reasons people commit suicide. And then hold up before us an underlying cause that seems to be characteristic of our age: he called it ("Existential dread".) Essentially it is the feeling of smallness, powerlessness, being of no consequence and the total absence of hope.

The only antidote there is for that is some sense that there is more to reality than we are able to perceive; that no matter how badly things look there is something else going on out there that doesn't meet the eye. No matter how much things look as if they're out of control, God is still God, the future is still his, no set back, no defeat upsets his rule. "The Kingdom ofGod is at hand".

Out of that hope, that basically positive attitude about the future and it's possibilities comes a new reason to work for a better world. Apathetic people are hopeless people. Involved, alive, active people are full of hope. That means going to Project Commitment

and sharing in the concerns and hurts of your black brother instead of being anesthetized one more time by T.V. It means going to the State Capitol on behalf of public education instead of throwing your hands up in despair.

It means realizing that in God's Kingdom-the state of God's rule - some issues that are difficult and controversial - suddenly become priority items: Is it possible, for instance, for a person who sees himself as a citizen of God's Kingdom, guided by God's will, to be unconcerned about peace, about justice, about hungry children, about oppressed people?

It means, I believe, taking the Church of Jesus Christ a whole lot more seriously than most of us do. Our job as a church is, fundamentally, to be an audio-visual aid for the purpose of showing the world what the Kingdom of God is. That's quite an agenda - but I believe it is what we are about here - nothing less. The job of the Church is, fundamentally, to so live the will of God that other people will be able to see it clearly: not to sell Jesus Christ like a box of detergent (laundry) - but to be what we say we are.

Finally, it is to pray "Thy Kingdom Come" - knowing that it is already here - it is at hand whenever the will of God is done - by me or to me. It is to know that God's Kingdom is hidden in our lives - just as surely as yeast is in bread. It is to know - with all the maturity we can muster-that God's Kingdom is not a Camelot: it does not mean painlessness; life without grief and suffering and sickness and death; but that it exists precisely in the midst of all of that - just as it was never more present in the life of the world than when Jesus himself was put to death.

"The Kingdom of God is at hand" he said. And I know it is - sometimes in worship, sometimes at the bedside of someone ill, sometimes when a child gives me a hug, sometimes when someone loves when they have every reason to hate, sometimes when people give themselves to their community and fellowmen and don't really have to.

Standing in the bombed-out ruins of his church in Stuttgart in 1944, Helmut Thielicke, preached a sermon that I have read and reread many times. Let me share one sentence with you:

> "In, with, and under the world's anguish and distress, in, with and under the hail of bombs and mass murders, God is building his kingdom".
>
> (Our Heavenly Father, P. 60)

Jesus Said:

"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel." AMEN

Father, as we move through this Lenten Season, help us to see that your Kingdom is as close as the person sitting next to us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN